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AUTHOR Small, Donald D.
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ABSTRACT

Many of the concepts that English teachers traditionally deal with are too "fussy" and inappropriate for the kinds of children who currently fill American schools. These minority students and latchkey kids find the archaic vocabulary and concern over grammatical niceties baffling--to them teachers are like "Doily People," people who are so nice they spread doilies before making love. Doily People diagram sentences, think there are more than two tenses in English, tell students "this is he" is always correct, and use words like "tardy" and "composition." In the world of students (the real world) no one really says "tardy" and no one ever has to write a "theme" or a "composition." Teachers should not make fun of the writing of government agencies when they themselves teach writing from antiquated handbooks that recommend equally stuffy vocabulary. Teachers should instead concentrate on the writing of commerce to teach students to write. Examples are advertising copy, journals, letters of different types, job descriptions, articles, minutes, technical manuals, and abstracts. Knowing how to write these kinds of documents is vital to success in almost any profession, and modern teachers of English would do well to stress these skills. (SKC)

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Archaic Concepts: Cloakrooms, Wraps and Compositions

by

Donald D. Small

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I begin by quoting Bob Richmond in the San Antonio Newspaper on this day:

> "For years English teachers have taught students the parts of speech. And for these same years, students have returned the next September never having heard of them. Obviously the teachers taught but the students did not learn what the teachers thought they were teaching them. In fact, students may have learned that grammar, parts of speech, etc. are boring and not worth studying. Whether we like it or not, learning to dislike reading and writing <u>is</u> learning--even though the opposite of what was intended. As a veteran teacher I conclude that there is some relation between teaching and learning. I'm just not sure what it is. I tend to learn most things that may have some meaning or context. I learned to use the semicolon in graduate school because I needed to know its function if I ever wanted to get an article published. What happens so often in language classrooms is that what is taught is not real. Pronouns, semicolons, prepositions--these things are abstractions and have meaning only if writing can have meaning. WRiting in school has little real meaning. Some skillful teachers are able to create real meaning in the classroom--most are not. Most teachers do not write, and, therefore, their exhortations to write are taken as posturings, as recommendations to do good. Because many high school newspapers are exercises in public relations students are not allowed to write about what they want to write about. Thus language and its use become identified as school skills, jumping through hoops for a teacher and a grade."

The demographers from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development have recently told us many things about our students today and those of tomorrow as well:

- By the year 2000 the 53 largest U.S. cities will have minority students as majorities.
- A near majority of our students are already latchkey children.
- Chicago city schools list only 10 to 15% of their students as White today
- Finally, I give you the children I saw on Friday, waiting, loafing on Houston Street, the streetwise unemployed.
- Need we talk about what we have nobly done to the unemployment rate

for 18 to 21 year old minority students in the last six years? 30%. This brings me to my topic. Cloakrooms, Wraps, and Compositions: Archaic Concepts...

Only teachers use such words. "Cloakroom"--no one <u>real</u> has one today, except teachers--or maybe Count Dracula who would have a legitimate need for one. "Wraps"--I still see this term used by the androgynous "doily people" in our schools...

"Doily people"--sounds like a movie title? "The Curse of the Doily People!" A doily person is best described by someone that I once worked with in the steel mills in Gary, Indiana. He was speaking of a teacher of English we both had known when he said, "She is so nicey-nice that I bet when she makes love she puts down a doily first..." Can you see that? One under each elbow, too, perhaps.

How can you tell if you are a "Doily Person"? Well, doily people never, ever walk on the grass-- or do anything else on the grass.

2. Doily People are masters of farther/further and the conjunctive adverb following a semicolon; however, they know nothing of the home life of their students.
3. Doily People diagram sentences, clauses, students and their own life.
4. Doily People still think there are more than two tenses in English.
5. Doily People would be horrified to read Robert Burns' most popular poem.
6. Doily People attended on NCTE convention--once.

7. Doily People have shoes and scarves or ties labeled and in boxes to coordinate with their clothes. (Brown scarf for beige suit)
8. Doily people never are ever known to write, except some gooey poems at 16 years of age.
9. Doily People tell students "This is he" is always correct, rather than pedantic.
10. Doily People always say "possessive," and would never say "genitive."
11. Doily People are neither male nor female--it wouldn't be nice.
12. Doily People never smile during the first week of school.
13. Doily People believe in "seatwork"--(Seatwork is for asses.)
14. Doily People use the word tardy. Well, when did you last say tardy--? No one in the real world uses that term--it belongs to the Doily People along with cloakrooms, wraps, lavatory and compositions or themes.

Did you ever hear an executive say, "Ms. Smith, take a composition."? OR: "Harry, the board really liked your last theme so we're going to make you a partner."? (No doubt in Doily People, incorporated.)

The real world our students live in does write, but it does not do "themes" or "compositions"--"But," responds our androgynous Doily Person, "the young must be taught the process of organizing, exposition, paragraphing, and outlining,...hence the composition; from composing, don't you see?" No, frankly, I don't. As witness we still have the archaic outlining procedures so advocated in our vaprous texts: "First, we outline, then we write."

Roadapples, Doily People. Tell that to Hemmingway or to EDS which produces corporate reports by the ton, runs them by an editorial/managerial Red Team, and then develops them further.

A few days ago this NCTE convention smuggly, rightously criticized the ponderous overwriting of some governmental agencies--for what? For using euphemisms like aluminum containment device instead of coffin. As long as you teach writing based on D.C. Heath and Warriners, so beloved of the Doily People in their snipped, antiseptic, euphemistic outlines, compositions and themes, you have no right to criticize the writing of others.

But enough--I nearly became one of those people... till my students brought my Playboy stories by Jean Shepherd. Stories such as "Harry Gertz and the 47 Crappies" or "Wanda Hickey's Night of Golden Memories" or "Grover Dill and the Tasmanian Devil" or "Our Lady of the Open Hearth," ... till one of them took us on a field trip to his mother's advertising agency--they did menus and commercials for area restaurants exclusively.

I learned more about word choice, vocabulary and word order in a half hour at the ad agency than I did with five years of pompous collegiate literature professors. I learned more there than I did in years of using the ball-less Warriner's or the volumes from Heath or Merrill. My plea is that we use the writing of the real world of commerce. For example, in grades 7 through 9 we could do journals, diaries, dialogue, personal letters, order letters, stories and song lyrics. In grades ten through twelve we could write sales letters, reference letters, instructions, directives, job descriptions, minutes, articles, promotional lettersw,

memoranda, brochures, information sheets, bulletins, reports, research reports, and advertising copy. And finally in grades eleven and twelve we could write proposals, questionnaires, prospectuses, technical manuals, abstracts, presentations, TV scripts and radio scripts.

My plea is that we use the writing of the real world of commerce, industry and media to teach today's student that writing is a vital, practical, job related, computer related, technological, paycheck related skill. The world of the service professions we are entering, Toeffler-like, requires such skills from sales people, nurses, technicians, painters, contractors, mechanics and media people.

And instead the Doily People give them what? Warriner's and the complex sentence... Heath and sentence diagraming and expisitory compositions (Did you know students call them suppository compositions?)

Do that! Go out to Houston Street and watch the youth as I did Friday. See the students' perception of reality. Leave your damn nicety-nice "river walk" which is beautiful and made for tourists, and get up to the streets in the gritty world of those kids--look them in their dark Latin eyes and give them

your Warriners: crippling hearts --

your outlining: Roman numeral missing, Jose --

your ectopic sentences --

your expository, Doily approach to writing

And it will be no wonder when they tell you as the Cheers TV writer I once met that such teachers need to win a glass navel award, so they can

see out...

Our youth need job skills first; that is <u>their</u> liberal art, for that only shall "liberate" them... This, the truth that shall make them and perhaps you, finally free...

(TOSS PAPER DOILIES OVER AUDIENCE)